

Can we take on the multinationals?

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Packard highlights the power of the multinationals. Owned by the giant General Motors, they laid down the law and got away with it. 38 people who had already been laid off were made redundant, 400 more laid off (and are not expecting to be called back), and the remaining 450 are working a 41 hour week for 39 hours pay. The firm is promising to pay retrospectively for the extra two hours at some undefined later date. In the meantime the unpaid hours have been used to finance the redundancies. And ironically, as the laid off workers left the plant on June 23rd, some of the remaining staff were put on overtime.

With 40% of the workforce in manufacturing industry employed by multinationals a realistic strategy is needed to stop them playing off workers in different plants against each other. Without a strategy the bosses can get away with wage and job cuts by threatening to move production to other locations if they don't get their way.

Most negotiations between big multinational firms and their workers are dealt with on either a plant-by-plant or a national basis. However times do arise when the head office decides to "draw a line in the sand" and make no concessions. This can happen as part of a cost cutting programme (to boost profits) or as a lesson to their staff everywhere that management make the rules and woe betide any worker who gets in their way.

Employers (are) offensive

For the past few years the employers have been on the offensive against us. They want lower wage costs, lower staffing levels, more casualisation, more mega-profits. In 1993 the Financial Times spoke for many bosses when it wrote that one of the good things it saw going on in the "third world" was the pauperisation of the workforce and a high level of unemployment. These were offering new ways to undercut what they called the "pampered Western European workers" with their "luxurious lifestyles".

So how do we deal with powerful multinational firms who often have an international income greater than the Irish government? If we end up having to strike they can often pack their bags and move to another country; where they will receive another round of tax breaks, free workforce training and preferential treatment. They can't always do this, especially if they have a lot of investment tied up in the plant, but it is sometimes a real threat.

Give 'till it hurts

And where there is no resistance to their demands they will keep coming back to insist on more concessions. So what can be done? In times when there is a higher level of militancy and solidarity among workers, action can be taken against their imports if they threaten to shut down their Irish plants.

This would entail winning the support of ferry crews, dockers, airport staff and road haulage drivers. Because this would run foul of both the Industrial Relations Act and the British anti-union laws it will not be organised by the union leaders.

Not only have most of them bought into "social partnership" politics but they also are afraid to risk their unions' funds. They know that the state would seek to financially cripple them as a warning to others.

The last time such an approach was tried was almost fifteen years ago during the Talbot Motors dispute. It worked, with government forced to intervene and create jobs for the workers. The key was not whether such action was legal or illegal but how much support it enjoyed from other trade unionists.

Trusting the state?

Another tactic that is suggested at regular intervals is pressurising the government to save jobs. This suggests that the state is some neutral body that can be influenced to take the workers' side. It isn't and it can't. While on rare occasions we can take advantage of splits in government or impending elections to make small gains, we should remember that the state serves the interests of the bosses. It has been called "the executive committee of the ruling class".

It is the state which entices multinationals to come here, which promotes Ireland as a country with low wages, generous tax incentives and the promise of a higher than average return on investment. It makes no sense to expect this same state to turn around and support workers against their bosses.

As employers organise across borders, so should workers. There are international trade union federations for most industries (food, transport, chemicals, etc.). Unfortunately these are of little use when big business decides to play tough. These federations do a useful job of collating information about health & safety legislation, making submissions to international conferences, and exchanging information about new work practices, but that is about all they do that is useful to rank & file union members. They are run by senior union officials, members have little or no input into them. The vast majority don't even know they exist.

Break through the borders

Real face-to-face links are needed with workers who share the same bosses. Shop stewards meeting shop stewards is the first step. We need to reach a situation where if one plant is threatened the others in the multinational refuse to take on their work. In most unions the leadership will not help to build such links, they are afraid of losing control over their members. Rather than support for such sensible initiatives we will be faced with condemnations of "unofficial" activity.

Yet workers in GEC, IBM, Ford and many other firms have built links in the past. The best way to start is for shop stewards to contact their counterparts in other parts of the firm, and then arrange to visit them. A small levy on union subscriptions or a couple of shopfloor collections per year would pay for travel expenses. From here we can work towards increasing co-operation. This could take the form of sharing information about what the firm is doing, what actions have worked in winning claims and ensuring effective blacking during disputes.

From there we can move on to extending co-operation and solidarity against the employers offensive. Such organising should not be in opposition to the unions but should be independent of the officials — workers' organisation that is truly answerable to workers.

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